



Background Paper

Committee: UN Peacekeeping Program

Topic: Intercommunal Violence and Persistent Attacks Across West Africa Referendum of Western Sahara and its Military Tensions

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The Western Sahara conflict is an armed conflict that has its origin in the 1970's between the Polisario Front and the armed forces of Morocco and Mauritania for the decolonization and independence of the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara from 1975 to 1991. The war originated after the Spanish withdrawal in 1976 (although the Polisario had fought against Spanish forces since its creation in 1973). In 1979 Mauritania abandoned the part it had occupied. In 1991 there was a ceasefire agreement with Morocco. Despite this, most of the territory is still occupied by Moroccans.

On April 29, 1991, the United Nations Security Council, in its resolution 690, decreed MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), located in the territory with the objective of preparing consultation to supervise the ceasefire. Although the consultation was scheduled for 1992, it didn't occur due to discrepancies over the census. The nineties passed between attempts to draw up a census for the referendum, after continuous disagreements between both parties. Meanwhile, Hassan II of Morocco decreed the division of Western Sahara into provinces, equivalent to the Moroccans. In 1999, the first electoral roll was published (with more than 86,000 voters). However, the situation remains stagnant.

Over the years it has not been possible to reach an agreement between both parties, which has triggered the conflict. In 2005 the then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, said at the end of his term that the Sahara conflict had a difficult solution. UN member states have so far been unable to enforce UN resolutions. The referendum seems to be delayed with no other date scheduled.

In 2005, the main urban centers of Western Sahara became the scene of serious protests in the Moroccan territory of Western Sahara. On May 25, 2005, the Moroccan police broke up the peaceful demonstration in support of independence and the Polisario Front. In November of 2010, the Moroccan police dissolved a protest camp on the outskirts of El Ayoun, later starting a series of protests by the Sahrawi population in the city itself, with the subsequent intervention of the Moroccan authorities.

Recently the conflict has reignited, on November 13, 2020, Morocco invaded Guerguerat (an area of Western Sahara controlled by the Polisario Front) due to a Sahrawi protest. In response to this, the Polisario Front declared war on Morocco hours later.

The Guerguerat crossing is located in the so-called "separation zone." According to the military agreements between the Polisario Front and Morocco within the framework of the UN and has been denounced by the Polisario Front as an illegal crossing. These agreements establish only four points at which it is possible to pass from one side to the other of the Western Sahara Wall. This was built in the 80s by Morocco to separate the territory effectively occupied by Morocco and prevent the incursions of the Polisario as well as the return of the Sahrawi refugees to the territory.

Following the decree of "state of war" from the Polisario Front, the "war parties" of the Polisario report attacks on different Moroccan military bases near the Wall. Information from the Saharawi refugee camps indicates the massive social mobilization of the population to enlist as volunteers and demand weapons. Morocco, for its part, recognizes the operation carried out by its Armed Forces, depicting it as "peaceful and harmless" to ensure the free development of products and individuals. It considers that it has acted in legitimate defense and underlines the normalization of traffic on the road connecting with Mauritania, allowing the passage of hundreds of blocked trucks. In the first hours he denied that there were attacks by the Polisario Front. On November 15, he denied that there had been fatalities and downplayed the attacks, calling it a "harassment" and "provocation." In its communications, it highlights the international support it is receiving.

Spain, a former colonizing power, issued an explanation engaging to duty and restriction and asking the parties to continue the negotiating process and to move towards a political, just, lasting and commonly satisfactory arrangement concurring to the parameters repeatedly established in the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.

The conflict could be a "potential breaking point that could have significant repercussions, these tensions could bring thousands of deaths, political, economic and global instability, it is vital that the delegates assume their responsibility and take part in the agreements that will help them achieve peace. It is important for the world to achieve social cohesion.

"We may have different religions, different colored skin, but we all belong to one human race."

- **Kofi Anann**

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